

A. S. Byatt

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Art, Authorship, Creativity

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palgrave



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2001 978-0-333-80108-6

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First published 2001 by
PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 978-1-349-42092-6 ISBN 978-0-230-51004-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230510043

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Franken, Christien, 1961–

A.S. Byatt : art, authorship, creativity / Christien Franken.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. Byatt, A. S. (Antonia Susan), 1936—Criticism and
interpretation. 2. Women and literature—England—History—
—20th century. I. Title.

PR6052.Y2 Z65 2001
823'.914—dc21

00-054525

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
10	09	08	07	06	05	04	03	02	01

Voor mijn moeder Janna en mijn broer Jan Wim

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Very difficult for a novelist to have 'opinions'. To see only one side of an issue and to stay with it. The world of the novel is always inhabited by aspects of the self that relate in dialectical ways, the movements of beings in time and flux, a kaleidoscope of mirror-selves. Splinters, shards.

Joyce Carol Oates

One is so much richer for being a great number of people

A. S. Byatt

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Preface

This study discusses the ideas about art, authorship and creativity in the work of one particular writer: the English critic and novelist A. S. Byatt (born 1936). This involves making a distinction between the academic and critic A. S. Byatt, on the one hand, and the novelist A. S. Byatt, on the other. Placing A. S. Byatt's critical work before her novels may seem an unconventional choice given the fact that she is much better known as a novelist than as a critic. Her critical work has seldom been the subject of sustained discussion and analysis in literary criticism.¹ When asked in interviews about the nature of her work and the type of critic she is, A. S. Byatt emphasizes that she does not see herself primarily as a critic. Her sense of herself is as a novelist whose practice and reading as a critic taught her how to write:

I've never thought of myself as a critic. I have written an enormous amount of criticism, but all of it has been in order to earn money, not because I thought of myself as a critic with a critical reputation ... All of it was written in order to understand how to write, and most of my big critical essays are about people that the writer in me wanted to understand very badly.²

Although A. S. Byatt is a thoughtful and articulate critic of her own work, in this case her emphasis on the novelist persona does her criticism a disservice. In the period in which she wrote her novels she also built up a critical record which is quite exceptional in its versatility and complexity.³ When it comes to a comparison between her critical work and her novels, Byatt's definition of her own writing practice is less useful for her reader; the fact that there are no *boundaries* between her critical and her fictional work does not mean that there may be no differences or tensions between these two fields of activity.

Indeed, in the first chapter I will show that Byatt's criticism testifies to the 'warring forces of signification' which continue to determine the content and aims of English Studies.⁴ It is my aim to

show that part of the interest of Byatt's criticism lies precisely in its polyvocal nature. This quality makes it futile to place her critical ideas about art, creativity and authorship in one specific category. The labels that are used such as 'humanist', 'post-structuralist' and 'feminist' are I believe reductive in this respect. Instead I will analyse the contradictory, yet highly productive ways in which Byatt's criticism moves across and in and out of Leavisite, post-structuralist and feminist debates about art, creativity and authorship, tracing an itinerary of her own.

My discussion of this itinerary serves as a framework for a new interdisciplinary approach to A. S. Byatt's fiction. I will look at the theories of art, creativity and authorship that are imaginatively constructed in three of her novels: *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967) and *Possession* (1990).⁵ *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game* are her first two novels, written at the time when she was still a student at Cambridge. Until now academic literary criticism has barely paid attention to them. I hope to show that they are rich and complex sources of ideas about art, authorship and creativity and as such can be compared to Byatt's bestselling novel *Possession*.

The concept of 'gender' will play an important part in the analyses put forward in this study. Adequate readings of Byatt's novels – by which I mean readings which truly bring out the interest and quality of her oeuvre – are impossible without a discussion of the work's relationship to 'gender' and 'feminism', a relation which is far more complex and interesting than academics and literary critics have noticed. For although academic interest in Byatt's novels has steadily increased from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, such work as exists often tends to emphasize only one aspect: the traditional and receptive character of her fiction. It is seen as a sieve through which the influence of other novelists such as Iris Murdoch and Marcel Proust runs its course. The emphasis on the receptive character of Byatt's work implicitly constructs her as a traditional novelist. Michael Levenson for instance highlights the traditional aspect of the Murdoch–Byatt axis: 'Murdoch has been her literary mother. The two of them alone are enough to count as a distinct contemporary lineage, nourished on the conviction that, our modernist complacencies aside, our Victorian origins are unresolved, unsurpassed'.⁶ Page and Cowley's description of A. S. Byatt as 'one of the most celebrated conventional women writers' has a similar effect.⁷

Other critics actively disengage Byatt's work from feminist concerns and subject matter, stereotyping her as a non-feminist, even anti-feminist, writer. Valentine Cunningham, for instance, writes that the novelist A. S. Byatt 'stands rather alone in her refusal to ride on a politically correct bandwagon'.⁸ Nancy Miller has coined the term 'the new misogyny' for this type of reasoning: it constructs an unbridgeable gap between well-known women writers such as George Eliot and Emily Dickinson – or A. S. Byatt for that matter – and feminist literary critics who argue that 'gender' matters to writing, literature and authorship.⁹

In any case, Byatt's novels are seen as more traditional than the work of experimental writers such as Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, Christine Brooke-Rose and Jeanette Winterson. However, this traditional quality of Byatt's fiction is deceptive. The following statement by DeKoven is applicable to the three novels under discussion in this study:

while it is an incontrovertible fact that the majority of the most successful, visible women writers employ conventional or traditional forms, it is also the case that their use of those forms is much less straightforward and unproblematic than it appears.¹⁰

A. S. Byatt's 1991 foreword to *The Shadow of the Sun* already points in this direction. It is a text in which she discusses at length what it meant to her and to her writing that she was an ambitious woman writer in the 1950s. She says in the foreword that the 'battle' of writing her first novel 'fought itself out between sexuality, literary criticism, and writing'.¹¹ The focus of my reading of *The Shadow of the Sun* is how this battle shaped itself narratively. Combining close reading with narratological insight, I pose the question what happens when a young female novelist deploys theories of art, vision and creative identity as a medium for her anxieties about gender and generation.

The Game (1967) and *Possession* (1990) invite a further theoretical context: that of myth criticism. After flourishing in the 1950s and 1960s through the work of influential exponents such as Northrop Frye and Leslie Fiedler, the practice of myth criticism came under critical scrutiny in the 1970s, dismissed as 'a form of reductionism that neglects cultural and historical differences as well as the specific

properties of literary works'.¹² In a balanced survey of the debate surrounding myths and myth criticism, Bullen mentions Voltaire, Roland Barthes, Frank Kermode and David Bidney as critics who are/were deeply suspicious of myths because of their static and conservative nature.¹³ I am among those contemporary readers and writers who think it is possible to find other, less reductive ways of conceptualizing the relevance of myths to our culture. Many scholars and philosophers have analysed the ways in which myths are still formative of Western culture. They emphasize the changeability of mythic material and the agency of the writer and the critic in rewriting myths.¹⁴ In a fascinating analysis of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', Isobel Armstrong defines Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Gaston Bachelard and Jacques Lacan as 'readers of myths who are themselves involved in the myth-making process'.¹⁵ A. S. Byatt can be seen as such a reader. She is one of a number of contemporary novelists and critics who are deeply interested in the creative possibilities of (female) myths.¹⁶ As a judge of the European Literary and Translation Prizes, Byatt noticed a mythical thread running through contemporary European fiction and saw her work as belonging to this tradition: 'one passion that runs right across Europe is for primitive narrative forms like classical myths and fairy tales, of which I feel myself to be a part'.¹⁷ In interviews and reviews Byatt has often expressed her strong interest in the narrative beauty of myths and has written about the use of mythical material by novelists. Two of these myths, the Cassandra story and the Melusine mythology, structure *The Game* and *Possession* respectively. In my discussion of A. S. Byatt's revision of these myths, I will devote attention to subjects such as the ethics of art, the artist as a visionary, the difference between scientific and artistic visions, the violence of the imagination, motherhood and art and women's access to artistic subjectivity.

Thus, this study aims to question those representations of the novelist and critic A. S. Byatt which reduce her work to its traditional, conservative and non-feminist aspects. It is my intention to offer further insight into the complex interaction between an artist's creative work, her critical work and, last but not least, gender as a constitutive cultural force. My intention in this study is not to seal Byatt's work within 'the hermetic forcing-house of academic

reputation' but to argue for a more nuanced criticism, one that will do justice to Byatt's patient and often ambivalent questioning of the connections between creativity, art, authorship and gender.¹⁸ For in the case of A. S. Byatt's work, nothing is as authentic or central as her ambivalence.

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Acknowledgements

I have spent years finding the words with which to investigate and explain the impact A. S. Byatt's work had on me. Although the effort was exasperating at times, the words on the page never bored me. The first person I wish to thank, therefore, is A. S. Byatt. Without the strength of her imagination this study would never have been written. As Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own* 'this is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge'. I would like to thank Alexa Alfer and Michael Crane for their painstaking work on the A. S. Byatt bibliography.

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Excerpts from *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game*, *Still Life*, *Possession*, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, *Passions of the Mind*, *Degrees of Freedom*, *Babel Tower*, by A. S. Byatt (Chatto & Windus) are reprinted by permission of The Random House Archive & Library.

Like any academic who sees her thoughts in print I owe an enormous debt to a number of colleagues and friends. I am grateful to my unconventional teachers Dien Muys, Inke Dam-Knook, Maureen Peeck-O'Toole and Simon Varey. Women's Studies at Utrecht University and its post-graduate seminar provided me with an intellectual environment that was truly stimulating to the development of this book. Rosi Braidotti and Maaïke Meijer taught me to think longer and harder about what I had read and enjoy it at the same time. Thanks to my colleagues in Amsterdam: Theo Bögels, Richard Todd, Sinead McDermott, Lachlan Mackenzie, Diederik Oostdijk, Rod Lyall and Katrien Daemen-de Gelder. With Richard I share the fascination for A. S. Byatt's work; I thank him for his

encouragement. Daniel Carroll has been a generous colleague and editor and Rieta Bergsma's wit is a gem. I have also benefited from the support of other colleagues in English Studies, especially Aleid Fokkema, Paul Franssen, Ans van Kemenade, Trev Broughton and the members of Anglo.fem.

Luck has been on my side where friends and mentors are concerned. Ank van Elk and Monique Kolfshoten asked all the right questions at crucial moments. I thank Angelique van Vondelen for her patience in managing me and my manuscript. Without the shelter and support offered by Ariadne van de Ven and John Prescott this book would have been more difficult to write. I also wish to thank my other friends: Margaret Koppejan, Maartje Los, Mischa Hoyinck, Monique de Bakker, Berteke Waaldijk, Wil Buchel, Elly Bruggink, Ben Platenkamp, Johan Pranger, Heleen van Dijk, Martin Soeters, Egbert St Nicolaas, Jan Vlaskamp, Jann Ruyters, Inez van der Spek, Marja Pruis, Jacqueline Panders, Monique Dijkman and Charles Forceville. Thanks to them I have been able to look beyond the confines of academic life. And, finally, I wholeheartedly thank my brother Jan Wim and my mother Janna for their love and encouragement.

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